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All That's Missing Is Air of Excitement

Scoopless, Soviet Press Fulfills Set Plan

Incorrect as received.

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MOSCOW, Aug. 21—The newspaper business is a big industry in the Soviet Union, and like every Soviet industry it works according to plan.

Every three months editors plan their coverage for the next quarter, which is written out in a three-month plan. They meet monthly to map out the coming month; weekly to consider what's needed during the following seven days; and every day to plan the paper that will appear two days hence.

This is the orderly, businesslike, Soviet way of doing things. It is also the sort of luxury editors can afford when the newspapers they put out contain little news (an essentially unplannable commodity) and a lot of feature articles, propaganda and exhortations to workers.

Three-month plans and newspapers without much news are indications that Soviet journalism is different from western journalism. But there are similarities too.

The mechanics of a Soviet newspaper are familiar to a Western journalist. They involve competition for space among writers and editors, arguments within the staff about how best to handle a story, and a thousand judgments each day about what to print, how to display certain stories, whom to send to the New York bureau, and much more.

Excitement Missing

Indeed, all that's really missing is an air of excitement. Soviet newspaper offices are calm, quiet, almost drowsy. Everyone on the staff of the daily paper "Socialist Industry," goes home from work at 6 p.m. At Izvestia, the Soviet government's newspaper, editors meet at 10:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. daily to discuss coming issues. Izvestia is an evening paper, and at the 4 o'clock meeting the editorial board makes its final decisions about the next evening's issue.

The managing editor of the paper, known in Russian as the "responsible secretary," announces his decisions about how he has allocated the available space to various departments. All Soviet papers are organized around departments with names like Party Life, Propaganda and Agitation, Industry, Foreign News and so on.

Sometimes, says Izvestia's deputy chief editor, Nikolai Polyanov, the allocation of space is a painless process; sometimes it has "a certain emotional undertone." The job of the chief editor is to be "the sensible doctor who puts ice on the hottest heads," Polyanov explained in an interview.

Arguments within the staff are not freely discussed with outsiders, but it is apparent that they usually concern tactics, not basic questions.

"Political arguments are impossible," the managing editor of Pravda observed. "We all belong to the same party, we see things the same way."

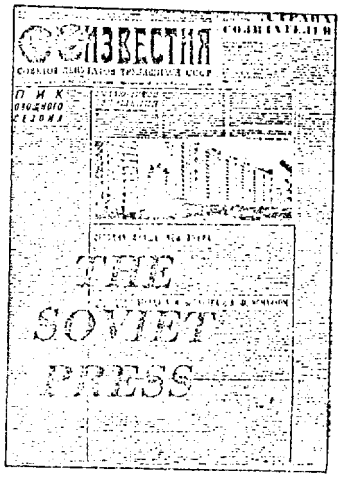
Nevertheless, arguments occur. For example, there were disputes last year when the Central Committee of the Communist Party, effectively the ruling body in this country, informed the major newspapers that the line should change in their coverage of the United States.

The Central Committee's precise decision (if there was one) is not known, but apparently its press and propaganda departments issued general instructions to end strident anti-American propaganda, and to publish more material about Americans as human beings. This happened shortly before President Nixon came to Moscow, which also happened to be the moment when the United States mined Haiphong harbor.

Writers Frustrated

More than one senior commentator was frustrated by this coincidence. One complained to an American colleague that he couldn't write what he wanted to about the latest turn in American policy in Vietnam.

Soviet correspondents in the United States and journalists who often write about America from here must feel a similar frustration with the high-level decision to virtually ignore the Watergate affair. Though Soviet journalists are servants of the government and first of all propa-



gandists, many of them are also serious reporters who would hate to miss out on one of the biggest news stories of modern times.

An outsider cannot say whether Soviet journalists are fundamentally frustrated with a system which subjects their work to censorship as well as political guidance. Former Soviet journalists who defected or emigrated to the West have said that demoralization is widespread, but their testimony may be tainted.

Some Soviet journalists write things that the public never sees, perhaps a vent to frustration. Correspondents of the news agency Tass, for instance, file much more than is ever distributed on the Tass wire. Some of this material probably ends up in Tass' secret, and reputedly quite objective, services for senior officials, such as White Tass, Red Tass and others.

A Tass man in Washington once assured an American colleague that he was a real correspondent "just like you," something the American would understand if the Tass man could show him everything he was sending home.

Formal censorship may be less bothersome than political guidance. Representatives of *Glavlit*, the state censorship agency, have a room in every newspaper office. They read every story to be sure that none contains any reference to the items that appear on a long list of forbidden topics which is the censor's Bible. All journalists know what's on the list, and they are presumably used to it.

A correspondent for one of the major papers must overcome stiff competition to get his work into print. Pravda, for example, has 45 foreign correspondents and 60 more at home, plus dozens of part-time reporters and all the copy produced by Tass' huge network of journalists. All of them are competing for space in a six-page newspaper, half or more of which may be filled with articles by party officials, foreign Communists, government ministers and other amateur journalists.

The competition is serious because a journalist's pay depends on how much of his work appears in the paper. A small dispatch of 200 words in Pravda is worth 10 rubles; a big feature story 1500 words long earns 70-80 rubles. An average experienced journalist on Pravda, according to Sergei Sukasov, the managing editor, earns 300-350 rubles a month — 450 to 525 dollars at the inflated official exchange rate. What Sukasov calls a "writing man" can make much more. This is good pay by Soviet standards.

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